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THE BORDER

By Rose Schipper Wightman

The old "Standuhr" in our living room, where we used to eat breakfast, struck nine. It was a fine Sunday morning in the fall of 1940. We were all sitting around the table and had finished our breakfast. You could hardly call it a breakfast, but it looked like one. There were cups and saucers and a coffee pot. Father had just finished a dark liquid which resembled coffee.

"She is the youngest," he suddenly said, pointing at me, "she has to get out of here. I heard only yesterday that they pick up young girls to wash windows, and then they joke around and push them down on the street. I have heard of two cases. Guthmann's daughter is dead (the father doesn't even dare to name the cause of her death) and another one that I do not know. So she," and he pointed again at me, "is in danger, and I say she has to leave, and fast."

"How?" Mother asked. "Schweiger came back only yesterday from Freiburg. It didn't work, and he was lucky to return in good health."

"So, what do you want? Keep her home? They know where she lives. We have good neighbors and an even better caretaker. I am going to talk with R. Maybe he can be of some help." With this, he left.

Mother cleaned the table. Warm air, unusual for this time of the year, came through the open window. On the broad, wooden sill, two sparrows were fighting for a crumb of bread. One was round and fat, the

other one tiny. The tiny one got it and flew away.

I felt very important. Never before had I experienced so much attention. I got up from the table.

"Where are you going?" Mother asked.

"Just to Hilda, around the corner. Maybe she knows something." What I really wanted was to tell her the news.

"No Hilda, and no going out!" Father shouted from the kitchen. "It's Sunday. They have their parades. Do you think I will complain to the cops if they catch you on the street?"

"I didn't think of it," I answered.

"You will have to think of it, if you do any thinking at all, and don't try to visit your gentile friends. I don't trust them."

The same afternoon my brother came home with good news. He had met a friend who had a friend in Zürich, who belonged to an organization which helped young people to cross the border. It worked.

Two weeks later, everything was arranged. I was to go with an elderly lady who had a son in Switzerland. I didn't know her and she didn't know me. We were to receive false papers, stating that we were Swiss citizens returning to Switzerland after a one-week stay in Vienna. I received the paper and packed.

I took a small suitcase and a bag. Father gave me a small sum of money which was more than Jews were permitted to take. This money and my real passport I hid on my body. I was soon packed and ready to go. We expected the lady around seven o'clock. Mother was the only one who

kept fretting around, putting little things in the suitcase. It made father nervous.

"Main thing she can make it," he said, "what do you care about the suitcase?"

Mother saw the point and sat down, finally. Her fine, pensive eyes were like always, but two red, hectic spots appeared on her cheeks.

The big clock in the living room struck seven, and at the same time the door bell rang. It was the lady, my travel companion. She was between forty and fifty. To me she appeared ancient. She had a kind of nervous tick. Her head was in a slight but perpetual motion, backwards and forwards. It looked as though she would say: yes, yes, yes, I know, I know, I know.

At eight-thirty we were sitting in the train. The compartment was crowded. I had not been scared before, but now I felt like I was sitting in a trap. I looked sidewards at the lady and could see that her head motions were more violent than before.

"Why don't you sleep?" I whispered.

She obeyed immediately and closed her eyes. I pretended also to sleep. There were four other people in the compartment; one man and two elderly ladies. They all wore Swastikas. The man cut with his pocketknife thick slices from a sausage. Each slice he peeled carefully and put the peel neatly into a small paper bag. The peeled slice he stuck on the blade of his knife and from there into his mouth. He wore "Lederhosen" and a " " He looked healty, satisfied and happy. The women talked

about the weather and the price of meat. Once the conductor came in to check the tickets. I had to shake my companion. She had actually fallen asleep.

After this, a minor quarrel erupted among my fellow travelers. The man in the "Lederhosen" wished the window to stay open, and the women were arguing that "Zugluft", that is a draft, was bad for health. They compromised and the window was shut, not entirely, a small crack remaining open. The quarrel made them change their subject and all three talked until the final stop, about various diseases and how to cure them with German herbs. The man seemed to be a great authority in this field. By the way, I heard that he was a veterinarian.

As soon as we left this enclosure I felt free and happy. Now the real thing started. We had to meet a man in an inn near the station. We were to order two coffees with whipped cream, and I was supposed to read a paper. The paper I had in my purse. If everything was to go all right, the man would approach us and say: "Guten Abend, could you lend me the paper?"

We found the inn, entered, and ordered two coffees. I said to the lady, "please smile and let's talk about something. Let's say, you explain to me a recipe."

"What recipe?"

"Apfelstrudel," I said. I don't know why.

She obeyed and smiled immediately. Obviously she was glad about any order I gave her. Few people were in the inn. The strong smell of

"Gulaschsuppe" filled the room and made me nearly vomit.

"Now you take two cups of flour, dear," the lady addressed me, "and a third cup water, mixed with oil. I use corn oil. It's the best."

The tin bell at the front door gave a weak, sighing sound. A man entered. We knew right away, it was the Swiss man. He looked like everybody else, but he wore no swastika, no medals, no "Lederhosen".

I do not recall what he wore, but, in any case, it was not a national costume.

"Keep talking," I told the lady, "how much sugar do you add?"

The man seated himself not far from us, and I picked up my paper and started to read. The front page brought a summary of a speech. A speech the Führer had given the previous day. It read-

> "It is important that we should shape Germany in such a way that whoever comes to visit us may be cured of his prejudices concerning us. I don't want to force National Socialism on anybody".

Familiar style, familiar text; I didn't read more, but I pretended to do so. I felt like being already far away, across the border. I will never visit you and I have no prejudice; who needs prejudice if one has experience, I thought.

I looked around, still holding the paper.

"What now?" the lady said. "Why isn't he coming?" Her head shook.

"Why did she have to come with me?" I thought, but I smiled at the same time because I saw the Swiss man getting up and approaching us.

"Guten Abend," he said, "would you be so kind to lend me the paper?"

"Certainly," I answered, and instead of thanking me, he said, hardly

moving his lips: "Wait for me in the little park opposite the inn - I will join you shortly." He looked like a ventriloquist. He paid and left.

The little park was easy to find. It was on the other side of the street. We sat down on a bench.

"I'm scared," the lady started out, "what did I do? Why do I deserve this?"

I had no patience left. "You don't deserve it," I said. "You just got it - anyway, it will be over very fast, one way or the other."

She fell silent. The night was clear and peaceful, with many stars and a bright moon. Somewhere in the distance a dog started to bark, and soon another dog answered.

We didn't have to wait a long time for the man. He soon saw us and we got up.

"You have your papers? Good! Everything will be fine. Should anything go wrong, I will say that you hitch hiked and that I let you ride my truck. Now, let's go."

We reached the truck and took our seats.

"It will not take longer than ten or fifteen minutes," he said, and then we drove off.

When we reached the border, two young men approached us. They wore red armbands with black swastikas and boots. Both were of the same size. They looked like twins. One ate an apple.

We showed them our papers.

"All right," said the apple eater, "you can pass."

Our man pushed the gas pedal when suddenly the other guard shouted: "Show me the papers once more."

Bright moonlight lay on his face and his black boots. He took the papers once more.

"Where is the date?" he asked, looking at me. "There is no date - you see?"

We saw. Bad luck! The one who had issued the papers had forgotten the date.

"Who are you?" he asked the Swiss man?

"I am from Zürich. I just gave them a ride. They were standing on the road. Here is my pasport."

"We don't need you, you go ahead," said the apple eater. "Get off the truck," he told us, and he gave the lady a push. He left the truck. The lady stumbled and got to her feet again. The Swiss man drove away. He drove fast. We could see the lake. On the other side of the lake was Switzerland. But we stood on Austrian soil, and we were Jews.

They took us to the small custom house.

"What now? What is going to happen?" The lady asked.

They didn't answer. Then the one who had discovered the missing date said, "You will be separated and searched. That's what is going to happen."

We entered the house. I went with the apple eater to the left, and the lady went to the right. I never saw her again.

He led me into a room, apparently an office. A man, about forty,

sat at a desk. The table lamp had a green shade. He looked up. His face was pale and tired.

"Heil," the apple eater said. "Sorry to disturb you so late, Herr Kaltenbrunner. We caught her. She wanted to cross the border with false papers, so you will be so kind to handle the rest, will you?"

"That's right! You can go. Good night."

The apple eater left.

"Have a seat," Herr Kaltenbrunner told me, and wrote some numbers on a sheet of paper. The phone rang.

"Hallo," Kaltenbrunner said, "Fraülein Luithild? Yes, I am informed. No, no, I couldn't tell you. You will have to see for yourself - right away? As you wish." The conversation was finished.

"Have a seat," Kaltenbrunner said, and I realized that I was still standing. I didn't sit down, and he looked at me. I asked with my eyes, what kind of a man are you? He bent his head and started to write.

"Listen," I said, and I felt like jumping into icy water, "it is true that I have false papers. I am a Jewess. I wanted to cross the border. I have money with me and my right passport. Take it from me!"

Two round, red spots appeared on his cheeks. My mother had the same spots when I left her.

"What are you asking from me, why do you involve me. I have two kids, they are little," he nearly shouted.

"Help me," I said.

"Give me the money and the passport," he addressed me suddenly, "but

fast. The woman will be here any minute."

I grabbed the passport and the money from under my coat, and handed him both. He put both items in the pocket of his trousers. There was no time left to say anything. The woman opened the door.

"Good evening, Herr Kaltenbrunner," she said. "I came to search her. She will have to undress. Could you leave us alone?"

He threw a short glance at me.

"Good luck, Fraülein Leuthild, and good night," he said to her, and left. It made me feel good that she would search me all over and find nothing.

She was pretty and neat looking, but a horrible person. She didn't talk much, but made remarks that sounded like short commands. She addressed me in the following way:

"Quite negroid, low forehead, curly hair, thick eyebrows." Then she made a few steps backwards and viewed my body (I had taken off my clothes).

"Bastard mixture," she said, wrinkling her short nose. "Put on your clothes and wait here."

The mere sight of her taught me discipline and I quickly did as I was told. A few minutes later I was picked up by another guard and loaded onto a huge, open truck. I found myself surrounded by five or six SA men in uniform, with rifles. Were I to move to the right or to the left, I would have touched a rifle.

"Where do I go?" I asked aloud. No answer.

With the tip of my forefinger I slightly touched the rifle to my left.

"I will not escape," I said. "Why do I need this?" No answer.

I resigned myself. When I was a kid I always used to ask the dentist: "Are you going to hurt me?" Instead of an answer, he always started to drill.

We drove first through open country, then we entered the town. A milk truck passed us and I saw a man leaving a house. He carried a kit and looked like a factory worker. When we passed him, he stopped and stared. I wanted to turn my head but didn't dare to do so.

Our truck soon held in front of an old building; it looked like a fortress.

"City prison," one of the men addressed me; he jumped off. I did the same. He rang the bell. An old man in slippers and a robe opened the gate.

"Heil, Hitler," my companion said. "Take care of her until you get further orders. Here is her suitcase. Heil!"

The old man mumbled something and raised his arm halfway to the Hitler salute. I went with him inside and he closed the gate.

Although what happened to me was very real, I felt like in a dream, and the old man with his key in his hand, the long hallway with its low ceilings and dim light, produced in me a feeling of horror and curiosity. He opened a small door into a tiny cell, with nothing in it but a rough, stone floor.

"Go in," he said. "I have to lock you up, orders!"

"For how long?"

"Do I know?"

"There is no bathroom here," I said in despair.

"I will bring you a pail. I am the Fazi."

"What is a Fazi?"

"That's me, a prison ward." He left and locked me up.

There was hardly enough room to sit down. I stood with my back toward the wall. It felt cold. After a while the Fazi came back with a pail and a blanket. It was only then, after he had locked me up for the second time, that I was overwhelmed by fear. I started to pound with both fists on the door.

Silence. But I didn't stop. Finally, I heard from far away the noise of his slippers, and when he came closer I heard him coughing and cursing:

"God damn it all, what do you want? Have you lost your mind?"

"Open the door," I said, "please open the door!"

"I have orders to keep you locked up."

"Open the door!"

"Will you shut up, you little slut? I am an old man and I have arthritis, so leave me alone!"

"I can cure you. I am a medical student. I have medication against arthritis, right here in my little bag. Please come in!"

He unlocked the door. "It better be true," he mumbled.

"Where does it hurt?"

"The back," he moaned.

"Take off your shirt," I said. He obeyed.

I looked at the flabby, yellowish back, with a big wart on the left shoulder blade. It was a brown wart with a few dark hairs; and the yellow back with it's wart looked to me like a cliff might appear to someone who is near drowning. I took a jar of coldcream and said:

"Take a deep breath, close your eyes and relax. Everything will be fine." I felt that in order to convince him of my abilities, I had to play a magician. He obeyed.

"You don't intend to do me harm?" he said, opening one eye.

"No, I will do you good," and I started to rub the cream along his spine in long strokes, and inn circles. Then I hit his back, rhythmically alternating with flat palms. I felt my hands getting warm and tired, but I kept on. He opened his eyes.

"It's better," he said. "It hardly hurts anymore. Are you a lady doctor?"

"No. Just a medical student. I told you. You come to me every night and I will treat you."

"That's a deal," he answered. "But I am an honest man and I don't accept anything for nothing. No! Not me! They didn't give me orders to feed you, but I will let you eat in the prison kitchen when no one is there. My wife cooks," he added, and blinked one eye.

We both kept our promise. He let me eat during the day, and I rubbed his back during the night.

On the third day he volunteered to tell me that they had taken me for a spy and that I would have a trial. I asked him to bring me my suitcase

so that I could change into something else.

"I can't," he answered, "I have no orders. Anyway, what for? Clothes don't make no difference - it's in the blood, they say. Right?"

What could I do but confirm Rosenberg's philosophy with a nod of my head?

At the end of the week he picked me up.

"Los," he said, with a changed voice, like a man who is hired to do a dirty job and does it. "Los Sora, march!"

We left the building and passed a courtyard. We walked among two rows of silver poplars and passed a small statue of the holy Mary. It was blackened by old age and rain, and both thumbs were missing; nearby stood a lovely little stone fountain. At the end of the courtyard was another building. We went up to the third floor. We stopped at a door. We could hear from outside the sound of various typewriters.

"There you belong," the old man said, "and don't tell them anything about my taking you in the kitchen."

I didn't answer. I heard his voice like from far away. Shall I knock once or twice, I thought, and then I knocked three times.

A young boy, apparently an apprentice, let me in. He looked at me and turned towards a person sitting at a desk.

"It's the Jewess," he said.

"Bring her in."

It was a rather large room with many windows. A number of employees kept typing busily. I was ordered to the front desk.

"What's your name," the person asked, without looking at me.

I gave him my name.

"Is that your real name?"

"Yes."

"Father's name?" I gave him my father's name. I spelled it for him.

"You would do good to tell me the truth," he said. He still didn't look at me. "Why did you want to go to Switzerland?" I kept quiet.

"I asked you a question," he said, much louder. A strange devil'may-care mood came over me.

I said, "The Jews are not welcome in Vienna."

"Is that so?" "Never mind. What is your father's profession?"

"He works for a shipping company."

"Do you realize that your father is a criminal?"

"No."

"But he is. All Jews are criminals."

"I didn't know."

"How come you don't know," he spoke very loud, his own voice seemed very convincing to him, "how comeyou don't know?" he repeated.

"How come you know?" I asked, forgetting where I was and with whom I talked. He did, too.

"Why, it is written in your own holy book, in the 'Tohund', isn't it?"

" I never read it. I don't know enough hebrew, do you?"

"I don't have to," he sneered. "I will tell you something: ten years ago our intellectual class hadn't the least idea what a Jew is, now we

know. The Jew lives upon the decay of people, you know who said that? Dietrich Eckart, a personal friend of our Führer."

The mention of the "Führer" alerted us both, although in different ways. He grew angry, and I got scared.

"Where is your passport?" he asked, rather rude.

"At home. I didn't take it with me."

"Where is the money?"

"I didn't take any with me."

"You will regret it, if we should find the money. What's your name?"

"I told you before."

"Never mind, what's your name?"

I began to realize his method. When I returned to my cell, I fell fast asleep.

Next day I had to see the same person again. He was almost friendly. He even asked me about the name and type of my gymnasium.

"Do you know Latin?" he suddenly asked.

"Why, yes. I had it for eight years."

"Then do translate this for me." It was some legal phrase as used by lawyers. I translated.

"See! You know Latin and many other things because your father is robbing our German people, making enough money to send you to school so you can take our places!"

I remained silent.

"What is your opinion?" he suddenly asked, "Will the Führer conquer

the world?"

I didn't think. I said, "No, never - even if we all have to die."

"Why do you talk so much to the Jewess?" A voice came from the far corner. It belonged to a young man, with straight hair falling over his forehead.

"She is my case, isn't she?" My man answered dryly, and to me he said, "You go back to your cell. We will call on you tomorrow."

This time when the old man came for his treatment I asked him whether he knew what they intended to do with me.

"You think they tell me? I am just a Fazi. If they really think you are a spy, they will shoot you in the courtyard, under the poplars. Are you a spy? You look quite outlandish to me."

"No, I am not."

"They still might shoot you. I always say it's fate, and you can do nothing about it - the whole thing with the Jews is fate. It's God's will. Would he let it happen if it were not his will? Therefore, it's right. That's how I figure."

I will try to relate to you what happened to me the next morning; although unbelievable, it was true.

I was picked up by a new guard. He carried a suitcase; it was mine.

"You come with me," he said.

Something told me that he was going to shoot me in the courtyard, under the poplars. "I am twenty years old," I thought, and I will have to die like a dog near a wall. I decided to curse them before the

shooting, and this thought gave me some comfort.

The guard brought me into a fancy-looking hotel. I got a room on the first floor with a giant bed in it. The bed had a pink, silken spread. There were three mirrors on the wall.

The guard handed me my suitcase.

"It's yours, isn't it?" I was dazed.

"Yes," I answered.

"You will stay here. Meals will be served in your room. You can't leave it without permission. There is a guard at the door. Be ready for tomorrow. At ten o'clock sharp somebody wishes to see you."

The man who wished to see me (he waited for me in the same room where I had my two interviews) had especially arrived from Switzerland. He was the Mayor from B. He introduced himself, shook my hand cordially, and asked me if I had been treated well.

"Very well, indeed," I answered, and grinned.

He, too, smiled.

"I cn grant you a safe return to Vienna," he said, "you are free and you can leave today."

"Sir, I don't want to go back. I want to enter your country. Why can't I?"

"My dear, young lady! Unfortunately, you have violated the law of your country in using illegal channels."

"But you know it all, Sir. Please let me cross the border!"

He answered: "You see, the border in itself, is an expression or a

manifestation of law and order. I, as a mayor, cannot let you cross it illegally."

"Then let me cross it legally!"

"I can't, now that you have violated the law."

"But I had to do it, and you know it all."

"Meine liebe yunge Dame, do you want to cause a war between Switzerland and Austria? Be reasonable. Here is your security certificate. You take the train. No one will harm you," and he gave me his hand. I didn't take it, but left.

Toward evening I reached Vienna. From the station I took the crowded streetcar. I was scared, and clung to my security certificate. I thought of the Mayor from Switzerland and I hated him. Soon I reached our street, the "L a harmless name which has to do with lilies and old-fashioned wells. I reached the apartment house where we lived. When I entered the hall I could see the caretaker spying behind the window. Nothing had changed. I ran upstairs and rang the bell. Mother opened.

She laughed and cried, "Elli," she said,"my baby!" Something in her appearance startled me. Then, I saw. Within the short time of my absence she had turned white, and while I stared at her head in utter disbelief, I heard my father shouting:

"So, what! White, Black, what's the difference. Main thing, she has kept her hair. Elli, you are going to Poland. Aunt Sucka was here. She is willing to take you. Maybe you will save us all!"

Two months later I left for Poland. As it turned out, I could save no one.